

Report favors bullet trains
High-speed transit
By Sean Holstege, STAFF WRITER

In 2020, as many as 253 million people will travel between California cities, and the cheap-est, safest and least environmentally damaging way to get most of them around is on a new high-speed "bullet train" system. That was the finding of an 18-page summary of a 21/2-year environmental study that cost the California High Speed Rail Authority around \$20 million. The authority did not release the full 2,300-page report. "Cheap" is a relative term. As the rail authority prepared to release the environmental study Tuesday, it adjusted the cost of the proposed 700-mile system up to \$37 billion. Past estimates ranged from \$25 billion to \$30 billion. The European-style system would link San Francisco and Los Angeles with 220-mph trains that could whisk passengers between the two downtowns in 21/2 hours and serve 68 million passengers in 2020. The environmental study found that the hypothetical alternative was even costlier. To serve the same number of travelers, California would have to build nearly 3,000 miles of new freeway plus five airport runways and 60 departure gates in the next two decades, the report found. The price tag: \$82 billion, and such levels of construction are barely plausible in the real world. "We won't build 3,000 miles of freeway in the next 20 years, I guarantee you," said Assembly Transportation Committee consultant Andrew Antwih. "As far as I know, San Jose is the only California airport that has built a new runway in the last 20 years," said Ron Wilson, an aviation consultant for ABC News. "The bullet train looks more promising right now because there doesn't seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel for new runways at SFO," said Wilson, that airport's former spokesman. He said air travel between SFO and Los Angeles is so unreliable business travelers are booking hotel rooms to be sure they make their meetings. The rail authority predicts it can capture that market. Assuming that intrastate demand will grow 63 percent and population will grow 31 percent, mostly in the Central Valley, they found bullet trains were the best option. Other findings: bullet trains will add 450,000 jobs, consume less prime farmland and reduce travel deaths. In 40 years, foreign bullet trains have never been involved in a fatal accident. But analyzing the findings proved impossible after a news conference in which officials refused to take questions. The rail authority released only the 18-page summary and not the two-volume, 2,300-page report. Nor did it release a computer disc version, and the agency's Web site posted only the report's table of contents. At a hearing in Fresno today, the public will not be allowed to discuss the report or the schedule of upcoming hearings about it. "Constant evasion of details has been a hallmark of the High-Speed Rail Authority," said San Joaquin Valley watchdog Ken Gosting. "They say high-speed rail is a good idea. Yeah, we knew that." His group "concurs that more airports, highways and runways are not productive for California, but why are we paying all this money for something decided years ago? We can't

evaluate it without specifics." Instead Tuesday's news conference was more of a pep rally for supporters. "This is not your grandparents' steam trains. This is the next generation of technology and a secret ticket for a sustainable future for your children," rail authority board member Rod Diridon said. "It is bigger than any construction project in the United States. Make it happen. "It will focus growth as we double the state's population by 2040. It's the last chance we have to protect this state's farmland," said Diridon. The question will be cost. Can California, staggering under the weight of deficits and proposed multibillion-dollar bail-out bonds, afford it? Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed putting off a November vote on a \$10 billion bond that would start the project. Last May, state Treasurer Phil Angelides concluded that California could afford the debt because the state could meter out loans as it needed, and the big construction is still years away. Contact Sean Holstege at <mailto:sholstege@angnewspapers.com> .

Tuesday his spokesman, Mitchel Benson, said the office is analyzing the proposal in light of \$27 billion of bonds on next month's ballot and that "it would be premature" to reach the same conclusion again. In the fiscal year starting July 1, California will spend \$2.7 billion in general funds to pay down its debt, he said. Contact Sean Holstege at <mailto:sholstege@angnewspapers.com> .